



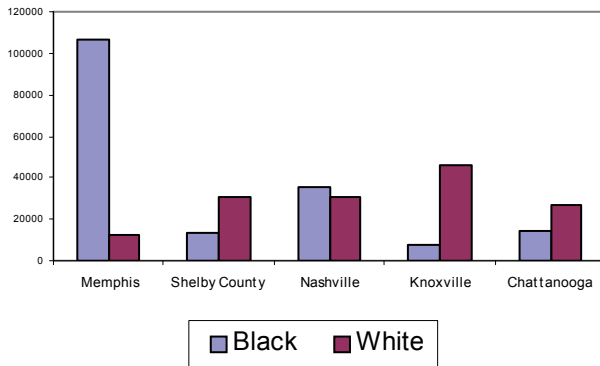
Educational Achievement in Memphis: An Overview of Student Performance

January 4, 2007

Children enter the educational system from a variety of backgrounds. Their social, economic, and cultural influences will contribute to their academic success. In turn, the education of children shapes their development and life chances, as well as the economic and social progress of our community.

- 1 in 5 of Tennessee's children live in Memphis and Shelby County.
- The Memphis City School District (MCS) is the largest in Tennessee and 21st largest in the nation.

Public School Enrollment by Race, 2006
(TN Department of Education)



Low SES has more impact on cognition scores than factors such as race, ethnicity, home reading, and family educational expectations (Economic Policy Institute 2002).

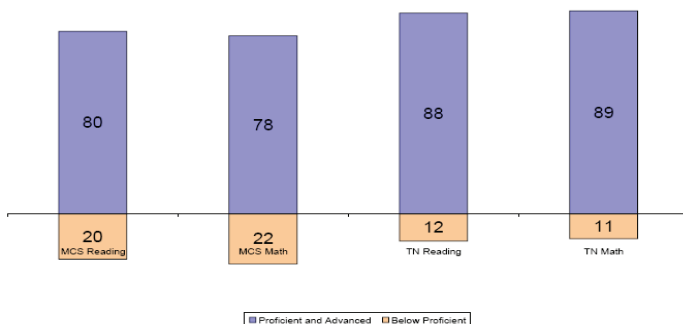
- 71% of MCS students are from low-income families (earning less than 185% of the federal poverty line). 20% of SCS students are from low-income families.
- In 94% of Memphis City Schools, a majority of students are from low-income families.
- In 75% of Memphis City Schools, at least 3 in 4 students come from low-income families.

MCS serves more—and more minority— students than any other district in TN.

- Memphis City Schools serve 116,000 students in 112 Elementary, 25 Middle and 31 High Schools.
- 85 % of MCS students are Black, 9% are White, and 4% are Hispanic.
- 97% of Black children aged 5—17 and 49% of White children aged 5—17 who live in the city of Memphis attend Memphis City Schools (2006 MCS, 2005 ACS).
- By comparison, in 2000, 97% of Black children and 60% of White children attended city schools (2000 AECF).
- Across the United States, 85% of all 5-17 year olds attend public school (2005 ACS).

The TCAP indicates that most MCS students are proficient in Reading and Math—but our rates of proficiency fall below the state average.

Percent of Students Proficient and Advanced on TCAP
Reading and Math in Memphis and Tennessee,
2006 (TN Report Card)



The TCAP (Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program) is the principal tool for assessing the performance of students in public school in Tennessee.

- The TCAP includes tests of reading, language arts, math, science, and social studies.
- The TCAP is a Criterion Referenced Test, meaning that students who have mastered a grade-level of knowledge should receive high marks on the TCAP exam for that grade.
- Scores on the TCAP are categorized as Advanced, Proficient, and Below Proficient.

- In the figure above, the vertical bars represent the performance of students in Memphis and Tennessee on the TCAP exams in Reading and Math.
- In Reading, 80% of MCS students are proficient, 8% below the state average.
- In Math, 78% of MCS students are proficient, 11% below the state average.

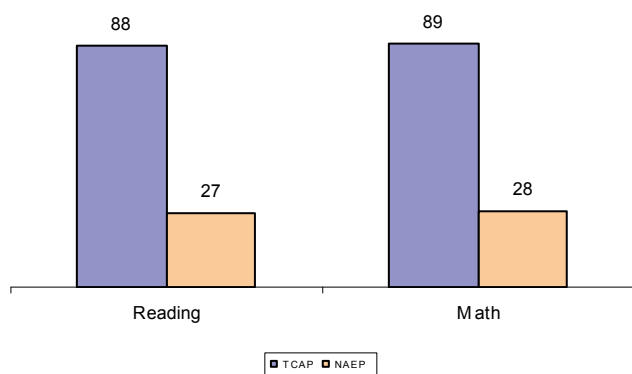
There are reasons to be cautious about TCAP results.

- Students are considered proficient on the TCAP if they are able to answer approximately 1/3 of the questions correctly.
- The results offered by the TCAP are very different than the results of national assessments of academic success.

27 percent of Tennessee students are at grade level in reading and math according to the NAEP—the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

- In addition to the TCAP, a sample of students in TN (and across the U.S.) also take the NAEP exam.
- The NAEP is “the gold standard of large scale assessments because of its high technical quality and because it represents the best thinking of assessment specialists ... and content specialists from around the nation” (U.S. Department of Education 2006).
- While the TCAP indicates that most students in TN are proficient in Reading and Math, the NAEP suggests that TN student performance is actually much lower (with a little more than a quarter of all students at grade level in reading and math).

TCAP and NAEP Scores for Reading and Math in TN (2006 TN Report Card, 2005 NAEP)



What explains the difference between scores on the TCAP and on the NAEP?

- One explanation is that the NAEP is not a high stakes test, and students and teachers do not take it as seriously.
- However, those states that have written their state exams to reflect the rigor of the NAEP find much closer scores between their state and national exams.
- A second explanation is that the TCAP evaluates mastery of the state curriculum, which is not aligned with the national content standards measured by the NAEP.
- The disparity in scores between the TCAP and NAEP suggests either that the TCAP is a suspect indicator of academic achievement, or that Tennessee’s public school curriculum does not align with national standards.

Implications for Public Policy

- TCAP results suggest that most students in Memphis are performing close to their peers across the state in reading and math.
- This picture is heartening given that MCS educates a disproportionate share of low income and minority students, two groups that historically have lagged behind their more advantaged peers on measures of academic achievement.
- However, our confidence in the high marks awarded by the TCAP is undermined by the much less encouraging results of Tennessee students on the NAEP exam, which suggests that only 27% of TN students are at grade-level; and by the low threshold (1 in 3 questions answered correctly) set to achieve a score of proficient.
- This discrepancy leaves us with little concrete evidence with which to assess the degree to which we are effectively preparing students to assume roles in the future within their communities, in the economy, and as citizens.
- Substantially different percentages of black (97%) and white (49%) school-age children are enrolled in city schools, suggesting a large racial gap in the public’s confidence in city schools, or in their access to other educational venues.
- Moreover, while the proportion of black children enrolled in MCS has remained constant since 2000, the proportion of white city children enrolled in Memphis City Schools has fallen by 15% over the last six years.
- Alongside the aggregate picture of student success, it is important to evaluate the size of the achievement gaps between low and middle income students and between students of different racial and ethnic groups. We present that analysis in a companion policy brief (http://theurbanchildinstitute.org/Downloads/cucp/TN_gap_analysis_7_24_06.pdf)

CENTER FOR URBAN CHILD POLICY

Advancing Public Policy to Improve the Well-Being of Children

For more information, visit

www.theurbanchildinstitute.org/cucp.htm

cucp@theurbanchildinstitute.org

Or contact the Center for Urban Child Policy at
901.678.1647